The Political Economy of Survival: The Eastern Roman Empire's Transition to the Early Middle Ages

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The scholarly literature is rife with studies asking why empires collapse. The majority of these works endeavour to explain how competitive exogenous pressures or internal challenges to the predominant power of the dominant group, or a combination of both, create the conditions and opportunities that are sufficient for the substitution of the ruling class, the destruction of previous institutions (mostly coercive apparatuses), and a change in the mode of production. Put differently, these studies tackle the question: Why, under certain conditions, were empires unable to reproduce their existing structures?[1] By contrast, relatively few studies examine why, how, and under what circumstances, in the face of severe crises, empires not only survived but managed to transform themselves into new polities that made possible their reproduction for centuries to come.[2]

John Haldon's *The Empire That Would Not Die: The Paradox of Eastern Roman Survival, 640-740* addresses this very question. In Haldon's view, "The Eastern Roman Empire offers a good opportunity to ask the question of collapse from the other side, about a collapse that we might think should have taken place but did not" (p. 23).

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[1] Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012; Bates, 2008.
[2] Wang Hui, 2016, redresses the balance in interesting way. For the theoretical framework, see Runciman, 2009.

Given the topic's importance and relevance, it appears opportune to offer some reflections on Haldon's achievement in a series of short articles that respond to central issues of Haldon's book: imperial ideology, the emergence of Islam, the role of Western provinces, and the fiscal apparatus. This overview summarizes the book's content and gives the gist of the four essays responding to it.

The book's theoretical framework is set out clearly in its introduction. In his account of the eastern Roman state, Haldon explicitly focuses on the relationship between individual agents and structures in historical causation. In asserting the importance of this relationship, he constantly bears three essential points in mind. Firstly, it is impossible to take structures as an object of analysis without also taking the agents who both constitute and are in turn constituted by structures as part of the same equation. Secondly, it is impossible to reduce the vast territory in which humans act upon nature and themselves – whether or not they know what they are doing – to a series of little enclaves run by a formal system of rules. Thirdly, and most importantly, social and material force in combination create the conditions in which individuals are transformed and act in a way that would be impossible under different circumstances.[3] These considerations enable Haldon to look at three key areas representing interdependent fields of social being: ideas, spaces, and praxis (p. 23). They occupy the terrain between structures and human activity, between conscious action and historical determination; in Marxist terms, as well as in Haldon's, I believe, they are what joins base and superstructure.[4]

After setting out these interpretative parameters, the book is structured as follows. The first chapter, "The Challenge", provides a concise but cogent political history of the period under investigation. In 565, the last year of the reign of Justinian, the Eastern Roman Empire reached from southern Spain and North Africa across to the Syrian desert and included Italy and Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica, the

[3] Callinicos, 2009; for the application of these parameters to a different historical context, see Tariq Ali, 2016, p. 4 ff.
[4] Haldon's concept of base and superstructure is explained in Haldon, 1993 and 2013.

Balearic Islands and the Balkans up to the Danube. By 650, however, this picture had drastically changed. After the collapse of Roman power following the Arab expansion of the years 634-650, with the loss of Syria, Palestine and Egypt, the Eastern Roman Empire was reduced to a rump of its former self. In the next fifty years, the Empire also lost North Africa (698), and the western provinces, with the exception of the Balearic Islands, Sicily, southern Italy, and the exarchate of Ravenna in the north. In consequence of the Arab expansion, vast territories, human resources, and – of course – revenues came under the control of the emerging Umayyad Caliphate. According to Haldon, however, the Caliphate was unable to channel all these energies in the struggle with the Eastern Roman Empire, owing not least to the decentralized nature of both taxation and provincial government in the Caliphate. This translated into a strategic advantage for the East Roman government, which had the time and the opportunity to reorganize its ideological, military and financial infrastructures.

Chapters two and three, "Beliefs, Narratives and the Moral Universe" and "Identities, Divisions and Solidarities", focus on how the East Roman political system evolved in order to respond to stresses and pressures of varying intensity provoked by the military threat of the Caliphate, religious dissent, and financial demise. In Haldon's view, the assertion of orthodoxy as an integral part of the defense of imperial unity facilitated the subordination of both Church and the faithful to the emperor. Although a highly disputed concept, orthodoxy became a fundamental element for maintaining divine support and, as a consequence, the loyalty of the army and of the population of the provinces. This close association between secular and religious powers is especially visible in legislative activity, which intensified the pervasive authority of the state. But it also strengthened the role of the imperial church as a key reinforcing and structuring element in the Eastern Roman notion of empire and imperial rule at the humblest level of village society (p. 127).

However, Haldon also points out that the formulation of a political theology intended to create a set of official beliefs is one thing, but gauging the extent to which such beliefs generated a shared

identity is quite a different matter. He questions the extent to which beliefs promoted a single ideology in terms of social action among the provincial elites as well as beyond the level of the literate and the privileged – whether in the realm of daily life or in relation to the ways in which the state could mobilize resources of manpower and materials (p. 128).

In order to assess the significance of Eastern Roman political theology in different social locations and places, chapters four and five examine the processes through which such ideas were enacted. Chapter four, titled "Elites and Interests", investigates the composition of the elites, the origins and status of the people among whom the financial, administrative, political, and military leaders and their staff were recruited. Haldon argues that the new elite incorporated many elements of the old establishment, but also that elite culture also underwent a radical change. The territorial contraction of the empire, the centralization of fiscal administration, and the weakening of cities as social and economic intermediaries between the provinces and Constantinople all played a role in the transformation of elite culture and in determining the composition of the social groups that ran the Eastern Roman state. In the mid-seventh century, Constantinople became the center of the imperial and ecclesiastical system. This may have further encouraged the regionalization or localization of society and administration in the more distant parts of the empire. New networks of power and patronage evolved between the capital and the provinces and within the provinces, and it is likely that it was then that individuals from Anatolian territories, of diverse social backgrounds, came to dominate the imperial bureaucracy at court and certainly in the provinces.

Chapter five, "Regional Variation and Resistance", moves the discussion to the particular circumstances of North Africa and Italy. In contrast to Anatolia, in Italy and North Africa there appears to have been a relatively clear distinction between "imperial" elites of high office-holders appointed largely from outside their province or region and the remaining members of the military, predominantly local men commanding local units. With few exceptions, the provin-

cial elites remained loyal to the imperial capital and to the emperor, even if independent-minded on key issues. In Haldon's view, the factor that most strongly affected the loyalty of the western provinces was the burden of taxes. The forms and degree of tax demand from the center largely shaped the political perspective and orientation of the provinces. The imperial position could be reinforced by the arrival of new officials or senior officers, or by the imposition of imperial political decisions by the exarchs. But the situation was inevitably complicated by the fact that movement from the level of provincial magnate or official into the senior ranks of the imperial service was limited, and even more so as regards access to the imperial court itself. This constraint may well have influenced the loyalties and political choices of those elites whose interests rested in and inevitably became ever more attached to areas far from Constantinople (p. 209).[5]

In chapter six, "Some Environmental Factors", Haldon scrutinizes the social and political arrangements treated in the previous chapters against the background of their physical environment. Research on long-term climatic variation and anthropogenic indications of evolving patterns of land use reveals that important environmental changes occurred between the mid-sixth century and the late seventh or early eighth century, and that these may have had important implications for the Middle and Near East, as well as for the neighboring regions. From these data, Haldon infers that not only was there a quantitative decline in agricultural production in the areas most affected by warfare (the cultivation of vines and olives receded dramatically from many areas), but there was also a proportional increase in the importance of cereal production and stock-raising within an impoverished economy and a human scenario characterized by a substantial demographic contraction.[6]

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[5] Here, the comparison with the western provinces in the mid-fifth century is striking. See Tedesco, 2016.

[6] Estimates of the population of the eastern part of the Roman Empire ca. 400 range between 24 and 26 million, declining to a low of between 10 and 12 million ca. 600, and to a mere 7 to 10 million by the early ninth century. See Meier, 2016.

In chapter seven, "Organization, Cohesion and Survival", Haldon connects his analysis of the ecological habitat with the problem of the products and wealth from which the government ultimately drew its taxes. In so doing, he translates environmental constraints and potential agrarian productivity into political economy, explaining how, despite changes in the production and distribution of resources – importing grain from far afield, and especially from Sicily, had become extremely problematic in the light of the growing Arab sea power – the Eastern Roman government's arrangements successfully responded to the challenges of collecting, distributing, and managing the key provision for the supply of the Roman military and the capital. Specifically, Haldon emphasizes the importance of the *kommerkiarioi*. Originally customs officers, through the seventh century they extended their functions well beyond their traditional duties, becoming responsible for collecting the requisite goods and services, which they acquired on a more or less regular basis through compulsory purchases or direct tax extraction. After the field army withdrew behind the barrier consisting of the Taurus and Anti-Taurus complex from the late 630s and early 640s, this tax organization also contributed to the pattern of distribution of the troops, who appear to have been allocated according to the productive potential and fiscal capacity of the individual provinces hosting them.

To sum up, in John Haldon's articulate and cogent scheme, five main factors combined to make the survival of the Eastern Roman Empire possible: the sacralisation of imperial rulership, based on shared beliefs and identity; the continuing collaboration of ruling elites, as leaders of the armies and managers of the fiscal apparatus of the center; the strategic geography of Anatolia (the Taurus and Anti-Taurus complex), which served not only as a defensive enclave against Islamic offensives, but also as a safe base of departure for imperial counterstrikes; the environmental changes and the associated shifts in agricultural production that enabled the empire to feed the army and the capital; and, last but not least, the remarkably flexible and effective fiscal arrangements that enabled the appropriation

of resources and their reallocation to the army in exchange for keeping the taxpaying population safe and loyal.

But the book also has a very particular theme running through it – that of tributary mode. By tributary mode, Haldon means a political system in which the exploitative relations between dominant and subordinated classes are hegemonized by "tax". Changes occurred, but in a context dominated by tributary exploitation (pp. 20-21, p. 179).[7]

The essays collected here raise the issue of the relationship between political power and surplus extraction, with specific focus on the internal cohesion of the state apparatus, the forms and degree of taxation, the opposition from the provincial elites and the landlords, and the continuity or discontinuity of the fiscal system under various rulers (Byzantine, Islamic and Lombard alike). This responds to Haldon's framework of analysis, which sees the historical transformation of the ancient state into the medieval Byzantine state as having been founded on the resiliency of the fiscal organization and its capacity to recombine a set of changing practices and beliefs in order to continue supporting the ruling elite. Thus, the question to ask after reading the following papers is not so much how many different levies, or roles attached to them, can be reported for any different stage of the period under investigation, but, more significantly, how many different ways were there that enabled institutions to constitute and determine the allocation of economic, ideological, and coercive power.[8] Put more simply, we shall ask whether there were means of distributing power that might offer an alternative to the exploitative relationship between the ruling class and the productive base.

To start with the question concerning political power, in the first paper, "Identity as Ideology in the Empire that Would Not Die", Yannis Stouraitis focuses on the theoretical foundations of Haldon's approach to Byzantine ideology and identity. Stouraitis describes

[7] Haldon, 1993, sets out the conceptual framework of the tributary mode; for criticisms see Banaji, 2010; for a reply, see Haldon, 2013.
[8] Runciman, 1989, p. 58.

Haldon's political theology in terms of Gramscian hegemony, as a combination of means of persuasion and coercion. Schematically, Gramsci conceived the concept of hegemony as a system of rule by one class or social bloc over others within a state in which coercion could not be divorced from consent, cultural ascendancy from repressive capacity. Specifically referring to the emergent Italian capitalist society in the 1920s, Gramsci theorized the transition from a society based on capital to one constructed beyond capitalist relationships, within a common conceptual framework based on the idea of hegemony.[9] Stouraitis elegantly explores the functioning of this concept in a framework in which, according to Haldon, the Eastern Roman state was not experiencing a historical transition of this kind, but was struggling for the reproduction of its power structures; in other words, the Eastern Roman state changed ideology and various practices in order to preserve the same dominant relationship between superstructure and productive base. In this regard, Stouraitis correctly emphasizes the role played by two corporations, the church and the army, which, despite modifications to their roles and functions, were but one part of the system of power that helped to ensure the continuity of the modes of persuasion, coercion and production.

While Stouraitis focuses on the internal cohesion of imperial apparatuses, Michele Campopiano, in his essay "End of an Era? The Impact of the Early Islamic Expansion on Economic and Social Structures in the Byzantine East", examines the administrative and fiscal infrastructures of its principal external enemy, the Umayyad Caliphate. Specifically, Campopiano asks how far taxation and governance in the provinces "conquered" by the Arabs continued to follow Eastern Roman patterns, in particular in connection with their relationship with local elites. Arguing for a substantial continuity, Campopiano shows how, as under the Eastern Roman Empire, tax extraction in Iraq, Syria-Palestine, Egypt and North Africa after the

[9] Anderson 2017a, [1976], with a new introduction (pp. 1-28), p. 16; to be read together with the complementary new study: Anderson, 2017b, p. 23, pp. 85-86.

Islamic conquest could either facilitate or hinder the establishment of the new rulers. The distinction lay in how the ruling authority managed the relationships with the local landowning classes, by balancing tax demand with tax exemption. In the light of this substantial continuity of fiscal management, the role played by the Anatolian plateau, with its particular geography and environmental setting for the defense of the capital, appears to have been a distinctive advantage.

Salvatore Cosentino also addresses the relationships between center and provincials, but, as made explicit by the title of his paper, "The 'Empire that Would Not Die' Looks West", he concentrates on western territories, and on Italy in particular. Based on extant records of tax pressure in "Longobardia" and "Romania" between the eighth and the ninth centuries, Cosentino challenges Haldon's thesis that high tax demand was the main factor dissipating the loyalty of the provincials. Suggesting that taxes were not especially oppressive under the East Roman rule, he singles out two alternative determinants: the inability of the Empire to protect provincials from the Lombards' military threat; and the role played by the Church as an institutional and economic power in those provinces where imperial rule and military presence were deficient. Cosentino also contends that the conditions of monetary economy in Italy in the period in question were very different from those in Anatolia: not only was the degree of monetization higher than in the East, but the flow of money into the economy did not depend chiefly on the functioning of the fiscal infrastructures. Despite these important qualifications, Cosentino does not reject the multiple functions that Haldon assigns to the kommerkiarioi in the rapidly evolving political and economic context of the seventh century.

Unlike Cosentino, in the final paper, "Killing 'Empire:' Goldilocks and the Three Byzantine *Kommerkiarioi*", Federico Montinaro assertively challenges Haldon's interpretation of the functions of these officials and more generally, the survival of direct taxation based on in-kind levy. In Montinaro's view, in the face of the seventh- and eighth-century crisis, the East Roman government rein-

vented most of its infrastructures, including fiscal arrangements. In turn, this organizational change resulted in the adoption of a system of tax extraction based on indirect levies (i.e. tax on trade). While Haldon places much emphasis on the organization of the state as a product of the tributary relationships between ruling elite, salaried army, and taxpaying population, Montinaro suggests, instead, that the state shifted from a system of extraction to another mode of surplus appropriation (from direct tax or compulsory purchases to indirect taxes) in order to respond to rapidly altered historical circumstances. This clearly reflects a different approach to the imperial tax system and to the Eastern Roman Empire as a whole.